



A review of social networks and social capital for volunteering for refugees

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Abstract

Volunteering is a prosocial behavior that benefits society in many ways, including refugees. This article reviewed past literature, especially past academic studies by various disciplines in the social sciences on volunteering for refugees, for example by volunteers from non-governmental organizations, that is generally facilitated by social networks. This literature review which is based on a qualitative approach and guided by a deductive research strategy analyzed several themes related to social networks, social capital, and volunteering for refugees that are found in the studies. The review aimed to demonstrate the strengths of the studies as well as identify some theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and empirical research gaps especially lack of sociological study of the empirical nature of social networks and how such nature can become the foundation for social capital for volunteering for refugees, for instance, Syrian refugees. Lack of study is also evident in terms of applying social network theory and utilizing social network analysis as an analytical and methodological tool. The review initially broadly analyzed some past studies on the refugee crisis, then followed by an overview of studies on forms of capital for volunteering and related theories of volunteering, and finally some studies on the role of social networks in volunteering. However, the gaps identified enabled the review to emphasize on the need to acknowledge the importance of close theoretical, conceptual, methodological, empirical, and practical link between social networks and social capital, particularly how social networks can act as social capital and bring benefits to enable the volunteers to help the refugees adjust to life in a new social context. Hence, the review implied its significance as it is able to contribute to new knowledge, namely sociological knowledge, on social networks and social capital for volunteering for refugees, including Syrian refugees, and on improving volunteering by non-governmental organizations and volunteers. Another significant implication is that governments can learn to create better policies regarding refugees and volunteering.

Keywords: Non-governmental organizations, refugees, social networks, social capital, volunteering.

Introduction

This article reviews previous literature, especially past academic studies by several disciplines in the social sciences on volunteering for refugees, for example by volunteers from non-

governmental organizations, that is generally facilitated by social networks. Non-governmental organizations conduct activities of public interest in various fields, such as charitable, health, educational, and religious concerns, which constitute a vital area of volunteering activities (Manswri, 2015). Volunteering to help other people, such as resettling refugees, provides social capital in the form of benefits to the volunteers as well as refugees such as adjustment to the new environment and establishing social networks in the environment (ICMC Europ, 2015). Understanding the ways in which volunteers contribute needs to be explained in the context of social networks, emphasizing the role of social network structures in the contribution (Bodin & Prell, 2011). Social networks include people and the ties between them. It is impossible or difficult for people to do what they want on their own (Field, 2003). Rather, they need to depend on others (network with others) (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010), and they are able to establish social networks because they have, for example, similarities between themselves (Chan et al., 2011, 2020; Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Norizan & Chan, 2022).

Specifically, this article presents a literature review on the refugee crisis, the role of social networks for volunteering in different social contexts, capital resources for volunteering and related theories of volunteering, and forms of social capital. The review analyzed several related themes. The following sections discuss these themes. The review aimed to demonstrate the strengths of the studies as well as identify some discipline based, theoretical, conceptual, methodological, empirical, and practical research gaps. In general, most of the past studies focused on explaining the relationship between social networks and volunteering, although they were conducted in different contexts. They sought to understand how social networks – direct ties – play a role in supporting volunteer work by developing or applying volunteering theories such as the integrated theory of volunteering, the hybrid theory of volunteering, and the resource theory of volunteerism as well as applying standard social research methodology. Based on the theoretical arguments of those theories, most previous studies examined and showed social networks as a social capital resource related to volunteering (Dávila, 2018; Dury et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2008; Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011; Wilson & Musick, 1997) related to the tripartite categories of human, cultural, and social capital explained by the above-mentioned theories by applying traditional social science methodology in collecting and analyzing data.

In general, the review revealed a lack of sociological study of the empirical nature of social networks and how such nature can become the foundation for social capital for volunteering for refugees, for instance Syrian refugees. There is also a lack of study on the application of social network theory and utilization of social network analysis as an analytical and methodological tool. Specifically, the studies have examined the relationship between social networks and volunteering in different contexts using volunteering theories and traditional social methodologies (Dávila, 2018; Kabelkova, 2013; McNamara & Gonzales, 2011; Wilson & Musick, 1997). However, there is a lack of studies exploring the relationship, for example, between social networks, social capital, and structural hole theories with social network analysis method, except for some studies that have done so but with other variables of interests (not volunteering) (Abbasi et al., 2012; Burt, 1992, 2004). This article reviewed this relationship in relation to volunteering, but distinguishing different theoretical arguments and methods to explain how can specific nature of social networks, i.e. direct and indirect social networks, provide benefits for volunteers to do their work helping refugees to adjust in their life.

The research gaps identified by the review demonstrated the emphasis on the need to acknowledge the importance of close theoretical, conceptual, methodological, empirical and practical link between social networks and social capital, especially how social networks can act as social capital and bring benefits to enable the volunteers to help the refugees adjust to life in a new social context. Hence, the review implied its significance as it is able to contribute

to new knowledge, namely sociological knowledge, on social networks and social capital for volunteering for refugees, including Syrian refugees, and also on improving volunteering by non-governmental organizations and volunteers. Another significant implication from the review is that governments could learn new knowledge to create better policies regarding refugees and volunteering. The following sections discuss the research methodology for the review and several themes related to social networks, social capital and volunteering found in the past studies, and finally research gaps identified by the review.

Method

This literature review is based on a qualitative approach and guided by a deductive research strategy that analyzed several themes related to social networks, social capital and volunteering for refugees and theory and methodology related to volunteering and social networks found in the past academic studies. The approach and strategy will allow an in-depth understanding and analysis of all the arguments posed in the past studies to derive their strengths and limitations to consequently identify research gaps. Secondary data in the form of published past studies are firstly collected for the review. The data is then analyzed to deductively extract several themes related to social networks, social capital and volunteering for refugees. Thereafter, deductive thematic analysis was selected as it is appropriate for such qualitative analysis of the past studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The analysis synthesized all evidences after comparing, translating, analyzing, and making new interpretations of the selected themes (Zimmer, 2006).

The strengths of the past studies will strengthen the argument on the role of social networks as social capital for volunteering for Syrian refugees for instance. Thus, the close theoretical, conceptual, methodological, empirical and practical link between social networks and social capital can be emphasized. As for the limitations, they are considered as the research gaps that have been identified. The strengths and limitations of the past studies will also demonstrate the significance of studying social networks as a social capital for volunteering of for instance Syrian refugees. In relation, the review is significant as it implied that it is able to contribute to new knowledge, namely sociological knowledge, on social networks and social capital for volunteering for refugees, including Syrian refugees, on improving volunteering by non-governmental organizations and volunteers. Another implication is that governments can learn to create better policies regarding refugees and volunteering. The following sections discuss the selected themes in studies such as refugees and refugees' crisis, forms of capital for volunteering, and the role of social networks for volunteering, and finally research gaps identified from the review.

Refugee crisis

Past studies have focused on the refugee crisis by explaining the most important matters relating to the host population's attitudes toward refugees, the challenges facing refugees, and ways to help the refugees adjust to life in the host countries. Depending on UNHCR data (2022), at the end of 2021, 89.3 million people around the world had been forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution, and 27.1 million of them moved to neighboring countries. People's attitudes in the host countries toward incoming refugees (or toward the increasing number of refugees) are mixed, based on various factors such as income level and employment status, and whether they have direct contact with refugees (Butkus et al., 2016; Ghosn et al., 2019). For example, Ghosn and colleagues (2019) found respondents had positive attitudes toward hosting the refugees because they had direct contact with them (Ghosn et al.,

2019). In contrast, there are some negative attitudes toward refugees entering other countries. In a survey that was conducted in 25 countries worldwide, many of the respondents in those countries believed that refugees were not really refugees but just wanted to receive economic and welfare advantages from the host country (Ipsos, 2017). Besides these initial prejudices, refugees faced other challenges when they arrived in their new country as well.

Refugees face several social, academic, economic, health, and psychological challenges (Anabtawi & Al Amad, 2019; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2017; Lee et al., 2012; Masud et al., 2017; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; Teshome, 2014; Xuemei & Grineva, 2016). Xuemei and Grineva (2016) studied academic and social adjustment challenges among youth refugees. The research found that refugees had difficulties with the host country's language as well as general educational gaps. Furthermore, Syrian married women seeking refuge in Jordan suffered in economic and social aspects of life, such as unemployment because refugees were not allowed to work, and felt disconnected with the host population (Anabtawi & Al Amad, 2019). In addition, refugees also faced health problems such as hypertension and mental health issues (Lee et al., 2012; Masud et al., 2017). The above-mentioned challenges or success of refugees' interaction with the new society could be helped by implementing some programs or activities including volunteer work through organizations or clubs and providing organizational support or strategies for refugees (Alencar, 2018; Greene, 2019; Nowy et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019). For example, voluntary clubs such as sports clubs could create opportunities for leisure time because of their general practice of providing services and opportunities to all people equally, including refugees (Nowy et al., 2020). In sum, the refugee crisis revealed different attitudes among host citizens toward the refugees, with some host citizens supporting them but others less so.

Forms of capital for volunteering

Social scientists in different disciplines, including sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and economists, have conducted many research studies to determine what resources help people to act in prosocial ways. Mostly, the researchers have answered that question by studying the relationships between three types of capital, namely human, cultural, and social capital along with prosocial behavior. Each form of capital includes several resources (e.g., education status, social networks, religion) that relate to prosocial behaviors, including formal or informal volunteering (Henriksen et al., 2008; Wilson & Musick, 1997), charitable giving (Herzog & Song, 2018; Lili & Graddy, 2008), and philanthropy (Brown & Ferris, 2007).

There are two recent works cited by many previous studies, namely those by Wilson and Musick (1997) and Einolf and Chambre (2011). Both of these works have identified that there are some resources of human capital, social capital, and cultural capital related to volunteering. Wilson and Musick (1997) constructed a sociological theory of volunteering they call an "integrated theory of volunteer work," based on the assumption that volunteer work is productive work, a collective behavior, and ethically guided work that requires different forms of capital. According to Wilson and Musick (1997), volunteer work in its formal and informal varieties requires resources that could be classified as either human capital, cultural capital or social capital. For example, they believe that social connections between people are many, different, and either organized or not organized, and that people volunteer because of these connections. They explain that the benefits of volunteering are social because they are embedded in the social connections, where frequent conversations and meetings between friends, for example, inspires and helps people to volunteer in a religious, political, local or national organization (Wilson & Musick, 1997). As presented, in addition to the above identification of resources for volunteering from the categories of these researchers, various

studies have determined which resources play a role in volunteering. They are classified here into three groups depending on the resources they focus on: human, cultural, and social capital.

Human capital

For some researchers, human capital resources are used in different types of volunteering; for example, education as human capital is supportive of volunteer work (Wilson & Musick, 1997) because educated people have more cognitive competence to do such work (Gesthuizen & Scheepers, 2012). In a research study, Gesthuizen and Scheepers (2012) sought to answer the question “why are educated people more productive?”. Depending on their research findings, more highly educated people had more cognitive competence, which made them more interested in volunteering. Furthermore, previous studies have generally found that there is a positive relationship between age, gender, work status, and volunteering. For example, females volunteered more than males (Kabelkova, 2013), especially single females (Mesch et al., 2006); males were likely to participate in voluntary political and education activities, but females were likely to do voluntary activities in the realm of social justice (Gil-lacruz et al., 2017).

Cultural capital

For a group of researchers, cultural capital resources support volunteering. Cultural capital or, alternatively, individual characteristics that measure personality traits, values, and motivations, encourage people to volunteer (Einolf & Chambré, 2011). Based on the results, self-determined or autonomous motivation positively influences volunteer work efforts (Bidee et al., 2013). Like motivation, values are also related to volunteering (Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Lam, 2002; Park & Smith, 2000; Taniguchi & Thomas, 2011; Wilson & Musick, 1997). For Wilson and Musick (1997), values are capital – at the cultural level – that encompasses attitudes and knowledge. Nonetheless, Taniguchi and Thomas (2011), in a study linking religious attitudes to volunteering, found that people with a higher level of religious exclusiveness did more religious volunteering, and the level of religious inclusiveness significantly increased both religious and secular volunteering.

Social capital

Researchers identifies social capital as the major factor in encouraging volunteering (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Wilson and Musick (1997) and Einolf and Chambré (2011) explained that besides individuals’ resources in the form of human capital, there are other resources considered to be social resources, including social contexts, social roles, and other social factors. According to Wilson and Musick (1997), interaction with friends or relatives inspires volunteering, and the number of children in the household is an important resource for encouraging volunteering among parents, because children who still live in the household may have more social contacts that draw their parents into more activities. Moreover, other studies have analyzed many other social capital resources such as group involvement (Forbes & Zampelli, 2014), home ownership, parental and marital status (Dury et al., 2015), and religious activity (Warburton & Stirling, 2007), but when studying volunteering they generally pursued a sociological approach and study social networks (Wilson & Son, 2018). This will be explained more in the next section.

Role of social networks for volunteering: Sociological perspective

From a sociological perspective, volunteering, as cited by Wilson and Son in 2018, is related to social networks. There are several studies that have investigated social networks and volunteering (Abbasi et al., 2012; Brown & Ferris, 2007; Dávila, 2018; Dury et al., 2015; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Herzog & Song, 2018; Principi et al., 2016; Wilson & Musick, 1997; Wilson & Son, 2018).

Wilson & Musick (1997) examined direct social networks as a significant resource – social capital resource – to support volunteering; however, they did not study whether volunteering can also be done through indirect social ties (Burt, 1992). Applying the integrated theory of volunteering as one sociological approach to the topic, they found that direct networks and volunteering are significantly relating to one another; to do volunteer work, people need to have ties with friends because these ties “embed” some resources such as information that can help support the volunteering actions (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Applying the theory of volunteering was helpful for the researchers in determining the role of social capital resources in doing volunteering. This standard theoretical perspective focuses on how people reach outcomes, but does not explain how people can reach outcomes due to others’ help or influence (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). This means that the theory does not explain how direct and indirect ties between respondents provide outcomes for them (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1994). To add to this, findings from the researchers’ study were based on traditional methods (from collecting data to analysis) but these methods did not enable a structural analysis of direct social ties, as could be done through social network analysis (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

Similar to Wilson and Musick (1997), Forbes and Zampelli (2014) conducted a study of capital resources, including social networks (direct ones) and volunteering. Applying a theoretical argument to volunteering and their methodology, they found that people who had more personal friends in different areas of life, such as community leaders and people on welfare, they were more likely to volunteer. In a study by Putnam (1993), the successful reforms in northern Italy were attributed in part to the many activities taking place in the region, such as participation in voluntary associations such as sports clubs. Furthermore, in a later study, Putnam studied the decline of social capital in American communities during the twentieth century (Putnam, 2000). For Putnam (2000), one reason for the lack of participation could be traced back to a lack of (face-to-face) interaction with others in the community. Overall, a lack of connections – strong social ties – reduced the number of people acting together to pursue shared goals (Putnam, 1995, 2000).

A field study conducted by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in 2018 identified social networks, i.e. direct social connections, was revealed that social connections supported volunteers in hard times, when they needed other people the most. Different from the above studies, Wilson and Son (2018) explained that the integrated theory of volunteering could not examine only one type of direct relations, but rather many types of direct relations at the same time. Wilson and Son (2018) studied the causal relations between neighborhood relationships and volunteering. Based on the results of their research, people who frequently had contacts in the neighborhood such as by visiting and sharing information were more involved in volunteering. In addition, family networks as another type of network also helped people to (informally) volunteer (Henriksen et al., 2008). Using a theoretical framework based on the hybrid theory of volunteering, Henriksen and his colleagues (2008) found that the Danish adult population depended on their family ties to volunteer in organizations. Moreover, Dávila (2018) examined friendships and acquaintances in relation to volunteer work among older Spanish volunteers. They found that the volunteers were encouraged through their connections with friends and acquaintances who also volunteered. However, this study

questionably did not frame the social theory, although it did recognize a relation between different types of social networks and volunteering as a social activity.

Likewise, Dury and her colleagues (2015) stated that the choice to become a volunteer is influenced by the person's social networks in the form of informal social ties. Their result was that frequent contact with friends (in terms of visiting and calling friends frequently) was the only positive significant social factor that encouraged older adults to volunteer. More specifically, in another study in 2020, the researchers used the social connectedness theory of volunteering to explain how formal and informal ties affected the choice to become a volunteer. In contrast to earlier studies, they applied a mixed-method research design. According to their findings, direct formal networks helped older adults decide to volunteer in later life (Dury et al., 2020). Although the researchers used a different theory of volunteering, the findings still suggested the same explanation of the dependence of volunteering on supporting resources, as volunteering was encouraged through social capital resources (Einolf & Chambré, 2011). The study did not focus on achieving a structural understanding and analysis of social networks, especially with the issue of indirect ties. Also, the above-mentioned studies were done in different contexts among people who were mostly in the later stages of life. None of the studies were done on refugees, for instance Syrian refugees. The different contexts may of course make for different outcomes.

In contrast to the standard studies mentioned above, in a network study design, Abbasi and his colleagues (2012) examined the structure of social networks. They conducted a study on co-authorship networks, not with volunteering, but with another variable of interest, namely research performance. In an ego-centric study using structural hole theory, the aim of Abbasi and his colleagues (2012) was to find correlations between the structure of collaboration networks and research performance. Collecting data from nine journals where the sampled scientists published their articles in the period 2000-2009, Abbasi and colleagues analyzed data through the social network analysis method. The results of their study showed that scientists who had strong ties with other authors who were not directly connected with each other were able to achieve a better performance. Also, the scientists who were linked only as co-authors in a group where the other co-authors were not socially connected had better performance (Abbasi et al., 2012).

Discussion

Although the studies mentioned above did investigate social networks, their knowledge on the topic of social networks in relation to volunteering is not sufficient for three reasons. The first reason relates to the issue of studying. Previous studies have mainly focused on examining the association between social networks and volunteering, but only in terms of direct social ties, and the outcomes of these ties. For the researchers, the main focus is on understanding volunteering (outcomes) in relation to direct ties. They ignore another common argument that relates indirect ties to volunteering. This is something some scholars and sociologists have been unable to do, although they frequently refer to social networks in their research. Also, the previous studies have examined the structure of networks by aggregating attribute data of their respondents. Their studies included respondents and their volunteering behavior as an independent variable, namely grouped network structure as an attribute variable of volunteering, but they did not explain how volunteers' social environment (network structure) influenced their behavior. It is necessary to use a social network analysis in order to explain how volunteers' social ties and their social behavior (volunteering) are interdependent. Social network analysis has theoretical significance in terms of the implications of social networks

for understanding direct and indirect social networks as a mechanism to generate benefits for the volunteers helping refugees.

The second reason is related to theoretical applications. The past studies have used volunteerism theories that generally explained how capital resources (social, human, cultural) are related to volunteering. The theories argued that capital resources could effect volunteering through social networks. The studies have mostly indicated the role of social networks in volunteering (Dury et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2008; Wilson & Musick, 1997), but there is not a clear theoretical foundation addressing the relations between social networks and volunteering via network theory. It has not yet been studied how the structure of networks as linking people together can be a means of completing actions. Those studies also did not apply social capital theory and structural hole theory (Abbasi et al., 2012) to investigate other issues except volunteering. It has not yet been studied how direct and indirect ties could support volunteer actions. Combining basic social network theory, structural hole theory and social capital theory is a strength to analyze both direct and indirect social ties and their benefits for volunteering; Social network theory is a theory as well as a methodology to study social structures systematically at both the individual and group levels (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Chan, 2017a, 2017b). Furthermore, structural hole theory argues that people who have direct ties with others who are themselves not directly connected can benefit from this situation (Burt, 1992). Social capital theory argues that people who have direct ties to other people can also benefit (Coleman, 1994). Social network theory explains who can get outcomes from the structure and how, and then both structural hole and social capital theories explain the way in which the network structure produces benefits. The third reason is related to the research methodology. The studies reviewed above followed standard social survey methods (Dury et al., 2020; Wilson & Son, 2018), except for Abbasi and his colleagues' research (2012). The uniqueness and contribution of social network analysis are similar to that of structural analysis in that it can tell a lot of things about why people connect with one another, what they can get from their connections that they cannot get on their own without connecting with other people, what people get out of the connections, and the people they connect with (benefits).

Conclusion

Overall, the review of past studies on social networks, social capital and volunteering has revealed some strengths and limitations in terms of research gaps. Those studies mainly focused on examining the association between social networks and volunteering, but only focusing on direct as opposed to indirect ties, as well as the outcomes of these ties. Also, the past studies applied theories of voluntary actions that generally explained capital resources (social, human, cultural) related to "volunteering" (Dury et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2008; Wilson & Musick, 1997). However, there has been no clear theoretical foundation addressing the relationship between social networks and volunteering based on the combination of basic social network theory, structural hole theory, and social capital theory. Last, another limitation has to do with the research methodology. The reviewed studies followed standard social survey methods (Dury et al., 2020; Wilson & Son, 2018), except for Abbasi and his colleagues' research (2012), but they did not apply social network methodology using social network analysis.

In general, the literature review in this article confirmed that the knowledge derived from the review is able to contribute to new knowledge, namely sociological knowledge from theoretical, conceptual, methodological, empirical and practical perspectives, on social networks and social capital for volunteering for refugees, for instance Syrian refugees. This implied that by considering social networks as a form of social capital, they can be used to

improve volunteering by non-governmental organizations and volunteers. Another implication is that governments can learn to create better policies regarding refugees and volunteering. Thus, the practical significance of this review is that it provides knowledge on how can social networks could benefit organizations including non-government organizations and agencies that are responsible for overcoming the challenges that refugees face when adjusting to life for instance in Slemani City. The knowledge can also be used by volunteers, NGOs, and agencies to conduct or improve their volunteering work for Syrian or other refugees. Furthermore, the knowledge can also benefit other agencies, such as any organization that runs programs to support refugees in other cities, such as explaining what organizations can do to promote higher volunteering activity. Besides the review of past studies can highlight the need for future research on analyzing and explaining how social networks can become social capital for volunteers who are not only helping refugees, but also helping asylum-seekers, displaced people, or immigrants in various different social contexts.

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